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ABSTRACT

In order to indicate the severity of a student's writing difficulties, this paper reproduces portions of his written work in a remedial composition course and examines the following corrective measures attempted by the instructor: shortening all writing assignments, using exercises from basic grammar texts, studying examples of the student's earlier writings, and assigning the writing of comic book dialogue to capitalize on the student's intense interest in comic books. Although none of the measures was successful, and the student received an F grade for the course, the instructor discovered two factors that may have contributed to the student's writing problems: the nonstandard language patterns in the comic books he read may have adversely influenced his writing style; and an earlier teacher's tendency to give his papers two grades--one for thought and one for writing--may have permitted the student to focus on content and to ignore the development of his writing skills. The paper concludes by wondering whether there are solutions to the problems of such students. (GW)

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When the Composition Instructor Is Inadequate

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When the Composition Instructor Is Inadequate

The Comp 1 course at the University of Missouri at Columbia is designed for those students who place in the lower half on the English admissions exam. Most of these students are not necessarily less intelligent than those who are exempted from Comp 1; they merely lack more of the basic skills of written communication. For this "lower" group, Comp 1 is a useful course. It teaches them how to communicate, how to read, and (hopefully) how to think more clearly. The course is helpful not only for students who plan to take additional English courses, but also for students who will take a variety of courses from different departments. However, there are some students whom Comp 1 cannot help. One such student is Tommy F.

During the second class period of the Fall, 1976 semester, I asked for an in-class writing assignment. The topics were autobiographical: write about your favorite place; describe yourself as your best friend would describe you; etc. From these papers I hoped to learn more about my students, thus supplementing the information I had obtained from information cards. That night, while reading through the forty papers I had received, I came across one entitled "A Friends' opinion of You, by Tommy F." The handwriting was almost illegible and only after three or four readings could I decipher the

meaning of the essay. Here is how it looked on the page.

> You must forgive The Tittle, but I believe
> That any opinion of oneself is biases.
> Whether given by me or anyone else of me.
> So If ask to given an openion of me, 'I would say'.
> --"I'm Just Like four billion other poor souls
> --who live here (onearth I hope)".
> Now That I've said my word for humanity
> --its time for the Partial Truth.
> --I'maperson (true) sometimes (also True), and
> --if you haven't geussed by Now slightly indec
> isive.
> OR Incredibly (and Foolishly) bold. I can be
> withdrawn and silent.
> I can even forget when to shut up (or
> when to stop writing).
> Note: I hope (sincerly (grades)) that both the
> essay and wayin which it was written
> have not confuse you too much.
> Thank you

Tommy's actual work appears on page 3. My first reaction was to find out more about the author of this essay.

Tommy F. is a sophomore, nineteen years old, and a major in Chemical Engineering. He is an avid fan of comic books and science fiction. He is also Black. In later classes he asked irrelevant questions on occasion, and sometimes he seemingly talked to himself. I noticed raised eyebrows among some of the other students when he spoke in class. I cannot make a statement on his "normality" or on his grip on reality, but he did seem to act quite differently than any of the other students. Perhaps he best explained it when he told me, "My thoughts seem to come out all at once and I have trouble hanging on to any of them." This might be important to a psychologist, but I could deal with Tommy only as an English teacher. He communicates quite well verbally.

Soon after this, I received a pre-writing assignment called

A Friends ~~opinion~~ opinion of you

English I

by Tommy [redacted]

You must forgive The Tittle, but I believe That any opinion of oneself is biases. BIASED
Whether given by me or anyone else of me.
So → If ~~ask~~ ASKED to given an openion of me, I would say,
"I'm Just Like four billion other poor souls
Who live here (~~on earth I hope~~)".
Now That I've said my word for humanity
its time for the Partial Truth.
I'm a person (True) sometimes (also True), and
if you haven't ~~guessed~~ by Now slightly indecisive.
OR I incredibly (and Foolishly) bold, I can be
withdrawn and silent.
I can even forget when to shut up (or
when to stop writing).
~~Note:~~ I hope (sincerly (grades)) that both the
~~letter~~ essay and way in which it was written
have not confuse you too much.

Thank you

"Types of Moods." Again, here is how this assignment looked on the page.

> There are moods; all kinds of moods: for
> the moment; or for the hour.
> For every person there is a mood; hate moods
> love, anguish, fear, anxiety, . . . etc.
> There a're in-between moods . love-hate, fear
> -anxiety, anguish-morose. . .?
> For you see a moods; in my definition; is
> a frustration of emotion.
> And so for every emotion there is
> A mood.

Tommy's actual work appears on page 5. I was sure I could not deal with this student's writing problems.

After discussing the problem with the Director of the Lower Division English courses, it became obvious that some sort of remedial help was necessary. Through Tommy's counselor and the University's START Remedial program, we arranged for an evening tutor. This was a step in the right direction and I attempted to use the tutoring sessions to supplement my classroom instruction. But a problem arose. Tommy did not feel that English was worth so much time; his other courses, he said, were more important. Nor did he like the idea of being singled out as being different from the rest of the class. Tommy was having problems with other courses (his index was lower than 2.0) and my attempts to develop a more individualized approach were met with a touch of annoyance.

My approach consisted of: shortening all writing assignments, using exercises from basic grammar texts, getting examples from Tommy's earlier writings, and using unique assignments that hopefully would make Tommy spend more time with English. His earlier writings from high school consisted of book reports of science fiction novels.

— Types of Moods English I 5/32

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Tommy [redacted]

There are moods; all kinds of moods: for the moment; or for the hour.

For every person there is a mood; hate moods love, anguish, fear, anxiety, ... etc.

There are in-between moods: love-hate, fear-anxiety, anguish-morose...?

For you see a moods; in my definition; is a frustration of emotion.

And so for for every emotion there is a mood.

—

—

His instructor gave him two grades for these reports--one for the writing and one for Tommy's thinking. Usually the latter grade was high and the former low. And some of his thinking is good. But attention was split between the two, and this I believe is a major problem. Unwittingly, the instructor, in dividing his grade, gave the impression that the language and the thought were unrelated. Thought was more important to Tommy and the reinforcement of obtaining good grades on one section of his papers probably outweighed his concern for the poor grade on the other section of the papers. After reading these book reports and Tommy's first Comp 1 papers, I decided to concentrate on getting Tommy to write correct simple sentences.

I believe that if he could learn to handle the sentences, Tommy would be able to correct other problems. I did not allow anything fancy, just simple sentences with openers and closers. My text was Warriner's English Grammar and Composition: Grade 8. I gave Tommy exercises from this book: underline the subject, underline the verb, identify sentences and fragments. The latter exercises showed what problems he had. Although he answered some of the problems correctly, it was evident that he had no sentence sense. Here are a few answers to an exercise which required him to identify sentences and fragments and to locate subject and verbs.

s v
The motorist hailed the old man. (sentence)

s v
The ferry had no trouble crossing to the opposite bank. (sentence)

s v
The ferryman took his time. (no sentence)

s v
The doctor warned me to remain in bed. (sentence)

S V V S V
Then he started to take the motorist across the river. (sentence)

V S
Please buy a gallon of kerosene. (sentence)

V S
Practicing the piano every day. (no sentence)

See Appendix A for the entire forty sentence exercise.

I next decided to concentrate on verbs. After a short conference in my office in which I explained the verb's use in the sentence, I gave Tommy twenty "underline the verbs." Some of his answers were "burst suddenly," "often swam," "was sweeping," "leaped from." He seldom isolated the verb alone; I attributed this to a feeling that his mind conceptualizes images rather than words. For example, "leaped from" describes the action much clearer than does the verb alone. He tended to combine the adverb or the preposition with the verb. But his problem is much more complex than this. For example, here are a few of his exercises.

Motionless upon a rock lay a black snake.

Down the street marched the school drum corps.

The judge's library contained more than a thousand books.

The entire exercise appears in Appendix B.

Tommy seems to combine the verb with the words immediately adjacent to the verb. The assignment specifically called for the complete verb alone. He seems incapable of isolating the verb from the words which complete the verb to him, there seems to be one mental picture which unites all. He also seems to have no conception of passive voice and inverted word order. "Rock" is combined with "lay" because they are both part of his "vision" of the action.

And the use of "contained more than a thousand" seems to result from the mental picture of a well-stocked room. It was obvious that I had to bring Tommy's mental pictures in alignment with the written language. How?

I kept him writing shorter papers. I understood what he was saying in these papers, but to do so I had to overlook his mechanics (something I find difficult to do) and try to conjure up his mental images in my own mind. Punctuation was a particular problem. Tommy's punctuation did not coincide with the meaning of his statements. Instead, it seems to stem from a desire to section-off his thoughts. Again, note the divisions in "Types of Moods."

> There are moods; all kinds of moods; for
> the moment; or for the hour.
> For every person there is a mood; hate moods
> love, anguish, fear, anxiety, . . . etc.
> There a're in-between moods . love-hate, fear
> anxiety, anguish-morose. . .?
> For you see a moods; in my definition; is
> a frustration of emotion.
> And so for every emotion there is
> A mood.

Tommy used elipsis frequently, mostly at the end of a phrase, but sometimes at the beginning. When I discouraged this, he began using many semicolons, as well as periods and dashes. Commas were seldom used to break up major divisions of a sentence. I realized that I could not begin to correct his punctuation problems; my priorities demanded that I concentrate on the sentences. All I could do was point out correct usage when he used it in his writing and make sure that my comments on his papers contained good simple sentences with correct punctuation.

This essay needs organization. Your text has more information on punctuation. If possible, try to use simple sentences.

During this time, I had given Tommy four F grades. On his fifth paper I gave him a D, both in recognition of some slight improvement and for morale. Tommy's attendance in class was sporadic, as was his attendance at his Thursday night tutoring sessions. He said that he just did not have the time to devote to English. He did, however, attend the short course in mechanics given by the English Department. His BET score, a test covering traditional grammar, improved from over minues 60 to minus 46 (minus 25 is passing). But there was still no sign of his being able to write at the lowest Comp 1 standards. I never doubted that he would fail the course, but I wanted him to at least finish it. My final attempt consisted of having him write his own narration and dialogue for a comic book. I thought that he might be interested in and challenged by the assignment. I told him my plan and he immediately objected to it. After I tactfully explained how rewarding and creative the assignment could be, he agreed to give me a dozen comic books. Of these, I chose Aquaman. My plan was to make a photostatic copy of a story and "white-out" selected passages. I would then ask Tommy to rewrite the passages, using simple sentences and no ellipses or dashes.

Then it hit me. I had been reading a few of the comics in my office (out of professional interest, of course) when I began to notice patterns in the dialogue and narration. Because space is limited and there is a need to put five or six pictures, or frames, on each page, comic books often split both narration and dialogue

between two frames. For example, the statement, "I must go quickly and save Luna from the Space Marauder," might be divided into two frames. Comic books are not standard in punctuation, and all of the letters of a sentence are usually capitalized. So, this complete sentence is broken in half, with ellipses used to connect the two frames.

I MUST GO QUICKLY . . ./. . .AND SAVE LUNA FROM THE SPACE MARAUDER

The use of ellipses vary, but it is fairly standard in the comic books I surveyed: Superman, Batman, Aquaman, The Fantastic Four, and a few others.

Tommy's written language shows this tendency to divide the language into small groups of words.

> There a're in-between moods . love-hate, fear
> anxiety, anguish-morose. . .?
> For you see a moods; in my definition; is
> a frustration of emotion.
> And so for every emotion there is
> a mood.

His use of the semicolon may be an overcorrection. I wonder whether some earlier teacher tried to correct his use of ellipsis and Tommy responded by merely substituting the sometimes correct semicolon. I was guilty of the same desire to have Tommy write "correctly," whether he understood the reasons for punctuating or not. Tommy's difficulty in punctuation and in sentence construction seems to be reflected in the punctuation and sentence structure o f the comics he reads. This is a frighteningly complex problem.

Another feature of comic books is the combination of words and

pictures. One does not only read what is happening; one sees it happening too. A reader of an action comic book can "picture" the action in his mind as he reads it. Verbs are connected with pictures. Tommy's writing seems to reflect this combination when he is called on to pick out the verbs in a sentence. The assignment on verbs (Appendix B) seems to show this conbination. I stressed to him that many verbs denote the action, and his responses usually combined the correct verb (action) with an adjacent word such as an adverb or even a noun (context of action). If a comic book portrayed the sentence, "Motionless upon the rock lay a black snake," the picture in the comic would certainly give a picture of the rock. Tommy identified the verb and its context and underlined "rock lay." He might have been visualizing the scene in his mind rather than seeing the words on the page. This is not a serious problem when he does this with adverbs ("often swam," "burst suddenly") because adverbs have a strong grammatical connection to the verb. Here his mental picture and the written standard are somewhat in agreement. But often they are not. And comic books support the mental picture rather than the written standard.

The comic book assignment itself was a complete failure. In his first narrative passage, Tommy wrote

> Now; beginning a new Chapter in the the crusading career of; Aquaman!
> It began days ago while Aquaman, was in Atlantis Far beneath the ocean waves, Battleing for his live against the usurper of his throne.

The assignment and the other revisions of the Aquaman comic are on page 12

Assignment: Rewrite the omitted passages in the Aquaman episode entitled "The Menace of the Marine Marauder."

1. Now; beginning a new chapter in the crusading career of; Aquman!
2. It began days ago while Aquaman, was in Atlantis Far beneath the ocean waves, Battleing for his life against the usurper of his throne.
3. For it was then, upon the surface, that the Marauder made his first appearance.
4. Seemingly coming out of nowhere; riding atop a huge sperm whale with a school of porpoises and dolphins followin-g in his wake; armed with a plan to shock the seas!
5. Soon afterwards in a hidden wooden cove.
6. Some fool who calls himself"the Marine Marauder" made off with the entire Swin-Flu vaccine for Europe.
7. But, right now, let's rejoin the stars of this magazine as they approach; the famed Aqua cave.
8. And those reserves are being shipped; off to Europe today; Right?
9. There's no doubt it. Aquaman they will.

In attempting to form a conclusion, I was wary of insiting on a direct causal relationship between comic books and Tommy's writing. He has other problems that are not related to comic book art: Black dialect, possible learning disability, no interest in the language and in Engligh courses, possible emotional problems. Tommy himself warned me against forming causal relationships; he told me he read other types of literature, especially science fiction. But he told me something else that might have a bearing on his writing. Tommy was not allowed to read comic books until he was thirteen years old. He's been reading them voraciously for six years now. I have samples of his writing from April, 1973.

> No Blade of grass (book title) is a interesting
> Book about a strange Aisian Viris that goes wild
> and it totally destroys the worlds grain crop (Like
> wheat, corn, even grass).
> As a result There's starvation and chaos occure
> thoughout the world.
> Because of this, known Civilization and laws are
> abolished, and Killing or fighting for food
> becomes a normal everyday act.
> And finally governments commit mass genoci
> -de in order to preserve food and man's very survival
> is threaten; for there is "No Blade of grass.

If anything, Tommy's writing has gotten worse since 1973. Could it be that the continued reading of comics, coupled with the lack of any standard written language, has caused him to regress in his command of the written language. I don't know.

But I do know this: few instructors are able to notice such problems. We are so removed from the types of writing that our students read; we read Milton and Keats and Hawthorne and other writers whom most of our students have never heard of. And we really don't know enough of what our students think about and read.

I was lucky; one of my out-of-the-ordinary ideas happened to turn up a source of influence that lies outside the province of standard written English. And I noticed it. But would I notice similar problems--would any of us?

So what do I do? I've already given Tommy F. a failing grade for English Composition 1, Section 32, MWF 12:40-1:30, Instructor: Murphy. What happens next? Teachers told him that there was a difference between his thought and his expression and graded him separately for each. Since Tommy's interest was in thought and since he could still pass his courses without paying attention to expression, he adopted the means of expression that employed much of his thought: comic books. Couple this problem with dialect problems, learning disabilities, and others, and the overall instructional problem becomes enormous. We have two choices. One is to decide that Tommy F. does not have the ability to succeed in college and let him fail, which I believe is almost inevitable. Perhaps he lacks the intelligence to make it. The other choice is to work with him until he can communicate effectively in something close to the standard written language. It's obvious that, in cases like this, the Comp 1 instructor is inadequate. So what happens to Tommy F?

Appendix A

Exercise: Underline subject and verb, identify sentences and fragments.

1. across the narrow, swift-flowing river — No sentence
2. a man (S) in an automobile tooted (V) for the ferry — Sentence
3. old Mr. Schmidt who ran the ferry — NS
4. emerged from his cabin — NS
5. he untied the ropes (S) that moored (V) the ferry — S
6. And started across the river to pick up the motorist (unanswered)
7. although the river was quite rough — NS
8. The ferry (S) had no trouble crossing (V) to the opposite bank — S
9. the motorist (S) hailed (V) the old man — S
10. he (S) said (V) that he (S) was (V) in a hurry to get across — S
11. the ferryman (S) took (V) his time — NS
12. in letting down the small (V) gangplank (S) — NS
13. as soon as the automobile (S) was (V) aboard — S
14. Mr. Schmidt (S) demanded (V) a dollar for the fare — S
15. Then he (S) started to take (V) the motorist (S) across (V) the river — S
16. going slowly through the rough water — NS
17. which made the motorist (S) even more unpleasant (V) — NS
18. he (S) wanted (V) the ferryman (S) to go faster (V) — S
19. arguing and pleading with him — NS
20. Mr. Schmidt (S), however, decided (V) that safety (S) was (V) more important than speed.

Exercise: Repeat above.

1. a cheerful fire (S) blazed (V) on the hearth — S
2. a heavy dump-truck (S) loaded (V) with rock — S

3. if the ice is thick enough, we shall go skating — S
4. with a chromium-trimmed dashboard — NS
5. he has not worked since his last illness — S
6. my desk is littered with books and papers — S
7. Mother was frosting the chocolate cake — S
8. the doctor warned me to remain in bed — S
9. the town clock boomed eleven — S
10. the boys headed for the show — S
11. when my father speaks, I generally listen — S
12. waiting for his turn to dive — NS
13. the policeman shouted because the dog was mad — S
14. since the lock is rusty — S
15. those shingles are old and weatherbeaten — S
16. please buy a gallon of kerosene — S
17. the shutter banging all night — NS
18. Have you that box of paper clips? — S
19. practicing the piano every day — NS
20. the sunlight streaming in the kitchen window — S

Exercise: Underline the Complete verb.

1. A resounding chord of music burst suddenly from the organ.
2. The farm boys often swam in the creek.
3. Rachel was sweeping the front sidewalk.
4. Into the garage limped a car with a balky motor.
5. The temperature will drop to zero tonight.
6. The old apple orchard still supplies us with good fruit.
7. The cat leaped from the tree to the roof.
8. The picnic was postponed because of damp weather.
9. Motionless upon the rock lay a black snake.
10. Two pigs escaped from the pen last night.

Exercise: Repeat above.

1. The doctor made a thorough examination of the sick man.
2. Mother had placed Mary's gift in a conspicuous place.
3. A rainbow has appeared in the sky.
4. We should have chopped enough wood for a rainy week.
5. The foundation of the barn will be replaced soon.
6. On his way to work, Pat always buys the morning paper.
7. Down the street marched the school drum corps.
8. The judge's library contained more than a thousand books.
9. The carpenter will come today.
10. The dog might have killed one of the chickens.